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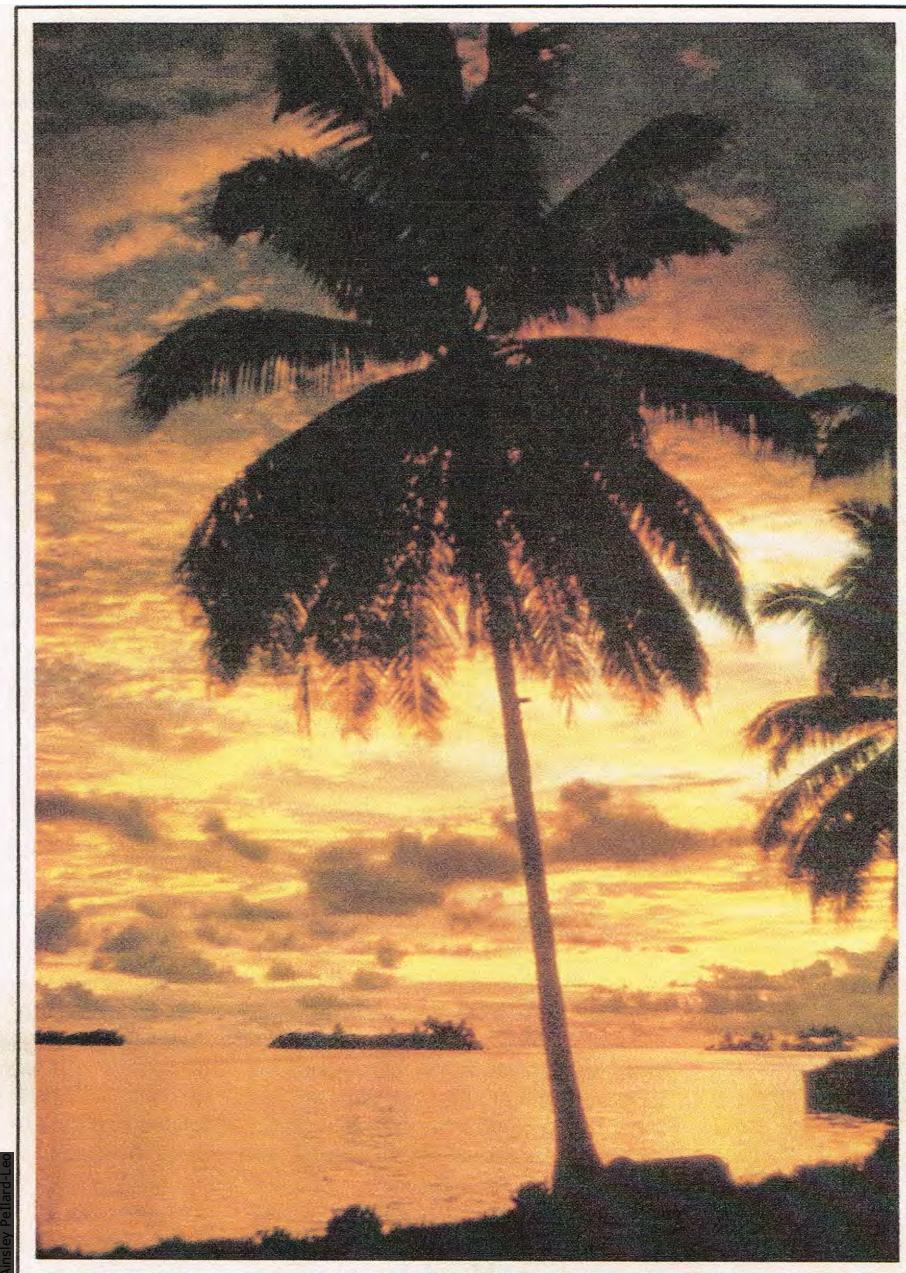
*A guide to
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THE PERILS OF PALMYRA

By Betty Fullard-Leo



BETTY FULLARD-LEO

Many people dream of owning a small tropical island. But they have no idea what a problem it can be



Palmyra's raw beauty, with its tropical sunsets (opposite page) and tranquil lagoons (above), has attracted everyone from condominium builders to sweepstakes promoters, but most business proposals have brought the island's owners only headaches.

Betty Fullard-Leo's husband, Ansley, is one of three brothers who own Palmyra.

hen I sailed to Palmyra in December 1979, one of the ship's crew said, "I wonder if this trip will be affected by the Palmyra Curse." I bristled in defense of our family atoll. It is true that Mac and Eleanor Graham disappeared on Palmyra in 1974. It's also true that boats sometimes hit the reef when navigating the coral-rimmed channel into the main lagoon, but to me that didn't mean the whole place was cursed! I preferred to think of the atoll my husband and his two brothers own as a lovely, remote group of islands where escapist can swim naked in warm, fish-filled lagoons and dine on fresh coconuts, crab, lobster and tern eggs plucked from land and sea.

"There's no curse," I retorted. "The only reason yachtsmen have problems is because they haven't prepared themselves."

Three-and-a-half years later, I'm not so sure anymore. Taking off my rose-colored glasses and looking at Palmyra's history from before my husband's parents acquired it in 1922 right up to the present, I'm beginning to wonder if the curse theory has some merit.

Palmyra has been sitting 960 miles south of Hawaii and 5°45' north of the equator since it pushed its way to the surface of the ocean as the rim of a volcano and began to grow the coral that forms more than 30 tiny islets of the horseshoe-shaped atoll. It was first sighted on June 14, 1798, by Capt. Edmond Fanning. On Nov. 7, 1802, it was officially discovered by Capt. Sawle of the American ship *Palmyra* and named Palmyra, although for a short time in the mid-1800s its name changed to Samarang, after it was visited by a ship of that name.

In one 39-year span in the 19th century, three different nations laid claim to Palmyra. Dr. G.P. Judd of the brig *Josephine* took possession for the U.S. and the American Guano Co. in 1859. In 1862 Kamehameha IV sent Zenas Bent on the schooner *Louisa* to perform a formal ceremony taking possession of the atoll for the kingdom of Hawaii. Thirty-six years later Cmdr. Nichols of the HBMS *Cormorant* claimed the island for Great Britain. The question of sovereignty was settled in 1898 when the **United States annexed the Hawaiian Islands**, and Palmyra was specifically

mentioned in President McKinley's message to the 55th Congress as part of the Territory of Hawaii.

In those early years, ownership of Palmyra passed from hand to hand like a hot potato. The earliest recorded owners are two New Zealanders, Zenas Bent and J.B. Wilkinson, both of whom were married to Hawaiian women. In 1866 Bent sold his interest to Wilkinson for \$500. When Wilkinson died the island was left to his wife, whose third husband eventually inherited it. The husband sold it to a relative, W.L. Wilcox of Hawaii, for \$550 in 1885. Wilcox sold it that same year to Pacific Navigation Co. "for \$1.00 and other valuable considerations," which in turn sold it to W.A. Kinney in January 1890, for \$750. Two months later Kinney sold it to F.W. Wunderberg for \$250 less than he had paid for it. In 1911, Hawaii Circuit Court Judge Henry E. Cooper, bought Palmyra from the Wunderberg estate for \$750. In 1922 Cooper sold it for \$15,000 to the Fullard-Leos, and our family (see sidebar) has been struggling with it ever since.

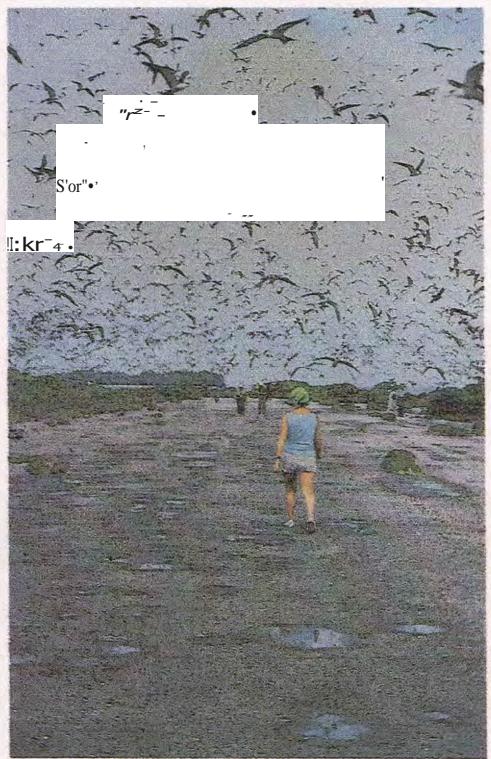
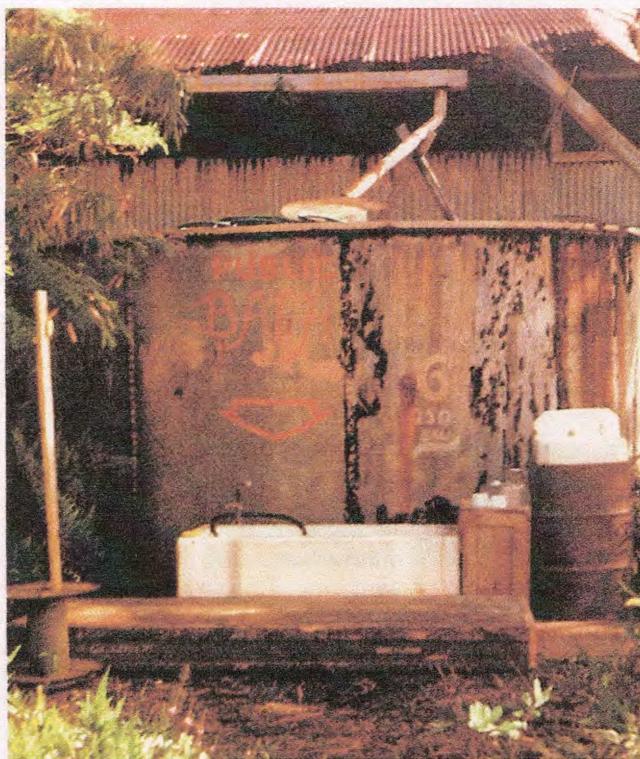
Palmyra's public bath (left) wasn't private enough for the author's taste, but quiet was easier to find there than on the old Navy airstrip (right), which had become home for thousands of squawking terns.

11 of these legal goings-on may have been an omen of future troubles to come, but the first

and most mysterious of Palmyra's shipwrecked - on - a - tropical - island stories happened even before the island's sovereignty was determined. An account of the wreck of the Spanish pirate ship *Esperanza* in 1816 found its way into the *Honolulu Commercial Advertiser* of 1903; a more complete story published 20 years later in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* from a different source confirmed the tale. It seems *Esperanza* had sailed from Callao, Peru, with a cargo of gold and silver ingots and other treasure sacked from ancient Inca temples in northern Peru. The vessel was attacked by a second pirate ship, however, and the surviving crew members sailed off with the treasure for 43 days, until their ship was wrecked on submerged coral one stormy night. In the morning, the 90 men aboard found themselves at the center of a reef three miles around. Their ship was leaking and its mainmast was broken, so the survivors transferred their gold and silver and provisions to one of the nearby islands where they buried the loot.

In the next year, two groups of the stranded pirates built boats and sailed for help, but only a single sailor named James Hines survived long enough to tell his story. An

Continued on page 74



ALL IN THE FAMILY

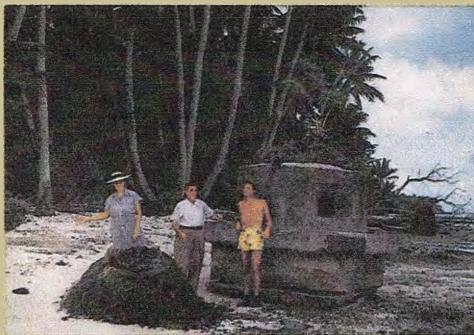
How does a family end up owning a small Pacific island? For my husband's parents, Leslie and Ellen Fullard-Leo, possession of Palmyra came about this way.

In 1918 Palmyra was the property of a Hawaii Circuit Court judge named Henry Cooper. That year, a small hui of athletes leased the island from Cooper. In 1919, Ellen Fullard-Leo, my husband's mother, bought the remaining unsubscribed stock and became secretary-treasurer of the Palmyra Copra Co. The company sent Col. and Mrs. William Meng and Edward Benner Jr. to live on the island for a year while assessing the possibilities for fishing, copra and other development. The Fullard-Leos financed the building of an 82-foot motor-driven fishing sampan, agreeing to hold the hui's Palmyra lease as security.

Three trips were made in the sampan *Palmyra*, and each time six or seven tons of fish were brought back, but because of what one newsman termed "those wily Orientals" at the local fish market, the new company could not get a fair market price for its catch. Fish that normally sold for 23 cents a pound went for 15 cents on days the Palmyra fish were brought to market. According to "Ma Leo," Oriental cooks and waiters in hotels and restaurants refused to handle Palmyra fish. When someone sabotaged the fishing sampan by putting emery dust in its engines, there wasn't enough money to go on with the project. The Fullard-Leos continued to pay the monthly lease rent, and when Judge Cooper wanted to sell Palmyra and move to California in 1922, they bought it outright and unseen. Cooper, who sold the atoll for \$15,000 after having purchased it in 1911 for \$750, became the first and only owner so far to make much of a profit from it. The Fullard-Leos' total investment in the venture was about \$60,000.

Since then, the development of Palmyra has vacillated between impossible dream and tangible problem. Every time a promising venture has come along, there has been some reason it couldn't work. When Japanese fishing companies expressed an interest in leasing Palmyra as a base at \$40,000 a year, for example, U.S. officials asked the family not to sell or lease to aliens. The atoll had value as a military base with its deep-water lagoon and mid-Pacific location.

From the family's viewpoint, the island's strategic location has been its biggest problem. Ma Leo's notes tell



Ma and Pa Leo and son Leslie near a machine gun pillbox on Palmyra.

the story. "The United States Services had been making surveys [around Palmyra] since 1936, but it was not until September 1938, that we were at all consulted when asked for a lease of two islands." Work on a base proceeded.

The Navy blasted a channel into the center lagoons and removed the natural formation dividing two of the lagoons to create a three-mile seaplane landing area. Nine of the islets were combined to form an area large enough for a 6,000-foot airstrip.

Ma Leo wrote, "We never received any payment, and the only communications received was notice of action instituted by the government in December 1939, to quit title to Palmyra."

The U.S. government claimed Palmyra on the grounds that no one individual held title to it prior to the annexation of Hawaii to the United States.

Ellen and Leslie Fullard-Leo, and finally their son Leslie Vincent, went through five federal court battles, winning each time the Navy appealed, until in 1947 the U.S. Supreme Court declared their Land Court title valid. Through nine years of court battles, the Navy had continued to build defense, air docking and personnel facilities, and had used Palmyra as an important link for delivery of air cargo aid to the southwest Pacific, Fiji, Samoa, New Zealand and Australia, as Japan controlled all other islands to the west.

The day after the Supreme Court declared the property title valid, the Navy pulled out. The islands that had housed 6,000 people were left, according to Leslie (the son), covered with "thousands upon thousands of tons of debris, surplus scrap, skeleton buildings, ammunition dumps, tumbling gun emplacements, and live dynamite storage sheds." He wrote, "Thousands of coconut trees in the only copra plantation under the American flag have been cut down or destroyed, and to make the loss complete, rats have

been introduced and feed on both blossoms and nuts ... Palmyra was renowned as a fishing base, but with the disturbance of live coral and dumping of ammunition and chemicals into the lagoons, fish poisoning became so evident, even the Navy forbade its personnel to eat lagoon fish."

It wasn't until October 1950, that the Fullard-Leos were awarded \$100,000 in "consideration of damages done to Palmyra." Out of this they had to pay their court costs. Papa Leo had died eight months earlier in February of that year. Ma Leo contended that the long years of legal entanglements had shortened his life. She was understandably bitter.

During those years, the city and county of Honolulu included Palmyra. This had only two tangible effects on its status; the Fullard-Leos were charged a property tax and a garbage tax. By 1956 Ma Leo was fed up with paying monthly bills for nonexistent garbage collection. She marched into Mayor Johnny Wilson's office. Rapping her cane smartly on the floor, she told him, "When you send a barge to Palmyra to pick up my trash, then I'll pay your garbage tax." She didn't get any more bills for garbage.

By the time the push for Hawaii statehood was on, son Leslie had taken over management of the atoll. Les is a quiet, proud man, and normally good-humored, but New Mexico's Democratic Sen. Clinton Anderson provoked him. Anderson was a member of the statehood committee who questioned the inclusion of Palmyra, because it was 960 miles from Hawaii. Les says, "He wrote me asking all sorts of questions. Because of the court case, he was questioning my family's integrity. He wanted to know how we had 'connived' to get Palmyra on the Territorial tax rolls, and how we could be so unpatriotic as to ask for rent money for 'a piece of sand in the Pacific' when our government needed it for defense."

Lack of patriotism was the wrong accusation for the senator to make. Les quickly pointed out that Ma Leo was the only woman who had ever annexed land (Kingman's Reef in 1922) for the United States. Les himself, at 36, had attempted to accept a previously offered commission in the Air Force when World War II broke out, but had been refused because of the government suit.

Les admits his reply to Anderson's letter was "somewhat strong." From then on, Palmyra was never included in the bills for statehood. —B.F.-L.

Palmyra

Continued from page 57

American whaler found him amid the wreckage of his boat after a storm in the Pacific. The whalers delivered him to Mission Hospital in Mission City—today's San Francisco. Before Hines died, he told a hospital attendant the exact latitude and longitude at which *Esperanza* had been wrecked, and eventually the story was passed on to a Honolulu harbormaster and came to light in local papers. The island, of course, was Palmyra. None of the other crew members were heard from again, so the possibility exists that untold treasures are still buried somewhere among the coconut trees.

A much more recent tragedy made Pacific yachtsmen openly speculate on the curse theory. Buck Walker and Stephanie Stearns waited until midday on June 27, 1974, to try to sail their boat, *Iola*, into Palmyra's lagoon, but still it had to be towed off the reef. *Iola* had leaked when it left Honolulu 27 days earlier; the grounding couldn't have improved its condition. When Walker and Stearns returned to Honolulu in October, the freshly painted boat they were sailing was not *Iola*. They were arrested in the fall of 1974 and convicted of the theft of *Seawind*, a boat belonging to Mac and Eleanor Graham. And seven years later, yachters found the remains of Eleanor Graham in an aluminum box that had washed ashore at Palmyra. An FBI agent contacted my husband, Ainsley, and his brothers, Leslie and Dudley, requesting permission to visit Palmyra for their investigation. Buck Walker was finally charged with the murder of Mrs. Graham last year, but the case was delayed because of requests for a change of venue and charges of double jeopardy by Walker and Stearns. On May 31, 1983, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Diego, Calif., ruled that the theft conviction and the charge of murder were not double jeopardy, but the defendants appealed this decision, so the case is still pending. Oddly enough, of all the yachters to visit Palmyra in 1974, Buck Walker was one of the few who had requested permission from the family. The Grahams had not.

My own first trip to the islands came in 1976 when

a New York-based firm decided Palmyra had the ideal configuration for an ocean thermal energy converter (OTEC). The head of this firm, a recent oceanography graduate, figured he could easily get a federal grant or other financial backing. He was planning to sink a giant pipe 2,500 feet into the cold depths of the ocean to create electricity and bring up nutrients for aquaculture. It occurred to us that very little electricity was needed on Palmyra, so we suggested an on-site inspection.

Scientists, financial backers, and Ainsley and I sailed on the 63-foot ketch *Kauwami*, reaching the atoll in the late afternoon of the seventh day. We moored at the mouth of the channel, where we could see tropical fish swimming among the coral in the crystal-clear water. The next morning a lookout sat on the mizzenmast, and another man kept an eye on the depth finder. I was on the bow as we slid past Sand Island to our right, a mound of solid green to the water's edge interrupted for a few yards only by a sandy protected cove. On our left two scraggly coconut trees sprouted from a rusted World War II landing barge that had run aground on the reef.

On shore Ainsley and I followed an overgrown path that had once been a roadway busy with military jeeps. We poked into the broken shells of the buildings the U.S. Navy had constructed there during World War II. At the edge of the airstrip we pushed through a thick hedge of salt bush. Huge red and blue hermit crabs scurried away to avoid our footfalls. The noise from birds was deafening. Millions of eggs, each less than a foot apart, lay incubating on the hard-packed coral airstrip in front of us. Terns and boobies circled about our heads, shrilly warning us to leave. No one would have believed that in three years more than a dozen planes would land on this same airstrip.

For five days Ainsley and I lived in a dilapidated barracks on which some yachter had whimsically painted "Palmyra Hilton." We chose a room with the screens intact and equipped our new home with a bed, mattress and bookcase. Every night I set a basin outside and each morning had fresh rainwater for bathing. The public bath was a bit too public for my liking, an open-air tub set next to a huge water tank by the boat dock.

We spent our time wading carefully in the clear lagoons alive with fish,

which were frequently chased by black-tipped sharks. Schools of papio and mullet swam around our ankles. We saw green parrot fish 4 or 5 feet long with their backs out of the water nibbling on submerged coral. The booby birds nesting in the salt bush along the shores were so unafraid of people, we could poke sticks at them and they only squawked. In the jungle vines fell from trees 50 feet over our heads to hide ruined buildings on the ground.

I came back from that trip enchanted by the beauty of Palmyra, but more than that, I realized how transient a being man is compared to nature. Nature had thwarted the military's attempt to tame the place: Birds had used the tennis courts to drop and crack shells; the old theatre with its tiered seats had become nothing more than jagged staircases jutting into the sky; the hospital building was so well hidden with earth and vines, it was invisible from 20 feet.

The young oceanographer from New York couldn't get financial backing for his OTEC project, and eventually my own "island fever" faded. But that was by no means the end of the visionary freethinkers who were interested in Palmyra. Ever since I can remember, Ainsley, Les and Dudley have been meeting with people who have dreams but little money to back them up.

Today Palmyra is administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior, which supposedly makes income earned there tax free, but leaves unanswered legal questions. The island's possible tax-free status, however, has encouraged over-eager promoters to call the family with what they think are fresh, bright ideas. Again and again, promoters have suggested gambling as an economic base for the atoll. Others have wanted to declare Palmyra an independent kingdom in order to set up world banking and stamp manufacturing. The privacy of the islands has attracted nudist, religious and gay groups hoping to find their own peaceful haven. Time and again we have learned of proposed ventures through the media simultaneously with thousands of other readers.

In 1965 a tentative lease was entered into with a Los Angeles firm called Tidewater Development. One morning in March local newspapers

announced Palmyra had been leased for a sweepstakes lottery, with 25 percent of the profits going to cancer research. The phones began to ring. Les gave statements to the papers. "Tidewater is a development corporation with interests in copra and fishing. No illegal lottery will be held," he told reporters.

It turned out Tidewater had agreed to sublease one island to the lottery outfit, if subsequent research proved a lottery would be legal. No papers had been signed, and none ever were. The people interested in the lottery ended up in court, but in the meantime, Les was made to look as if he had tried to cover up the facts.

It's frequently difficult to know with whom you're dealing. In 1975 the brothers gave a few families the right to stay on Palmyra for one year in exchange for clearing the airstrip. Later they learned many of these people had occupied the little coral island of Minerva 260 miles south of Tonga in 1972. The group had raised their independent flag over Minerva Reef, but before they had a chance to settle there, the king of Tonga dispossessed them and claimed Minerva himself. It became apparent this group did not have the money to finance a more permanent arrangement. After about nine months they agreed to cancel our agreement.

One promoter in 1978 not only had a plan, he was ready to put it into action—if we would agree to take all the risk. He wanted to build an exclusive condominium and sell it in time-share units, ultimately bringing in \$26 million. Part of the deal was that he pay no interest on the purchase price for seven years, and if he hadn't paid us off in that time, he would have the right to sell Palmyra to recoup his investment. We would get whatever he owed us up to \$12 million, but he could sell for as much as he could get over that. He wanted us to guarantee that Palmyra was exempt from taxes and from U.S. environmental protection laws. We said, "No thanks," and our reputation as "the family that's difficult to deal with" grew.

In 1979 an attempt was made to start a copra plantation on Palmyra.* For nearly a year-and-a-half, 22 workers from the Gilbert Islands, under the supervision of a Scotsman named John Bryden, cut coconuts and cleared roadways. We were eager

*Copra is the dried coconut meat from which oil is extracted.

to see development that we believed was in tune with the island's ecology. During 1979 Ainsley went to Palmyra twice, once to inspect the islands, the other time just to be there while Bryden took a two-month vacation. I was able to keep in touch by radio.

While Ainsley was gone, the papers made a new announcement. Without mentioning Palmyra specifically, there were "leaks" to the media in April and May of 1979 that the U.S. government was looking for a place in the Pacific to store foreign nuclear wastes. Government agents and University of Hawaii scientists had visited Palmyra in January of that year, but we'd been told the purpose of the trip was classified information. It wasn't until June 11 that Palmyra, Wake and Midway were named in the papers as the sites to be studied. At last we realized why the government was once again looking at Palmyra, and for a while our phone rang constantly. Not only did every newspaper, TV and radio station in Honolulu want interviews, but reporters from New Zealand, California and New York also called. Ainsley and Dudley couldn't tell them anything except that the whole family was opposed to the storage of nuclear wastes, foreign or domestic, anywhere in the Pacific.

We put together a slide show that showed not only the beauty and abundance of wildlife on an atoll, but also the way islands change and erode away. For the next several months my husband spoke to every group that would have him. In July 1980, the U.S. and Japan agreed to conduct a two-year feasibility study (at a cost of \$3 million) on storing spent atomic fuel on a Pacific island. On Nov. 11, 1980, the *Honolulu Advertiser* reported that Japan and the U.S. "will start joint research this month on plans for construction of a nuclear fuel waste storage center on a small island in the South Pacific." To this day no government official has ever consulted us about spent fuel storage on our islands!

Ironically, at the same time that one branch of government was planning to store nuclear waste in "monolithic towers of concrete" on Palmyra's center islands, another branch of government was arranging an inspection trip by a group of Bikinians interested in relocating. Interestingly enough, the Bikinians were moved off their own island in 1946 because the U.S. wanted it to con-

duct nuclear tests. Ainsley showed the Bikinians slides of Palmyra. Release of liability papers were drawn up, and they were told they could arrange a flight for an inspection trip. The military, however, would not give them permission to land its C-130 Hercules on Palmyra's unapproved runway, even though the same type of aircraft had landed there twice the previous year when the Coast Guard had responded to emergency calls. The Bikinians had a nine-hour flight in which they passed over the atoll without landing, and then went home without making any decisions. Still, we were not disappointed. Four hundred fifty people on Palmyra seemed to us more than the little island could handle.

In December 1979, it was again my turn to visit the atoll. The day after Christmas I sailed away from Ala Wai Yacht Harbor on the 83-foot brigantine schooner *R. V. Varua*, leaving my husband in charge of our two sons.

I had a week to rediscover the places I'd seen in 1976, and, thanks to the Gilbertese copra workers, it was

easier to get around this time. For 10 months they had been clearing brush and bridging areas that were broken through by high tides. One morning I hiked around the eastern lagoon and

"... To this day no government official has ever consulted us about nuclear fuel waste storage on Palmyra . . ."

found huge coconut crabs hiding in holes under tree roots and water tanks. Among the trees dainty white fairy terns fluttered overhead, unafraid even of Myra, the dog that followed be everywhere. I was enchanted all over again, and this time there was even a sort of civilization to return to after a day of exploring.

The village area was alive with dogs, cats, two pigs, countless chickens and ducks, and a couple of goats, as well as a few people. A headquarters building had been repaired to serve as living quarters, and behind it was a primitive bath and laundry building where I could enjoy the

luxury of a private bath in an iron washtub.

I had been there only two days when Palmyra's "curse" reared its head again. We knew seven ham radio operators were flying in on a Lockheed Lodestar on the morning of Jan. 5, but they came before dawn while most of the village was still sleeping.* John Bryden raced on ahead to the airstrip while I hurried down with two of the Gilbertese girls to greet the newcomers. The first I knew anything was wrong was when John met us on his return from the airplane. He stopped the tractor he was driving long enough to shout, "It crashed! It really did crash."

The only woman aboard was the one person injured, but the rest of that day was an agony of waiting for the Coast Guard C-130 plane to fly in and take her to Honolulu for medical attention. For the rest of the week the "hams" transmitted day and night to other radio operators around the world. They took so few breaks, I was surprised when one day I hiked

*Ham radio operators often like to transmit their signals from unusual, remote places; this is why they were visiting Palmyra.

out of the brush to find two of the "tourists" walking along the path with cameras hanging around their necks. With only two motorized vehicles (a motorbike and a tractor) operating, it was still a far cry from Waikiki.

I continued to call it bad luck when one of the ham radio operators cut his hand so badly at the end of the week that the Coast Guard had to make a second evacuation trip. And no one mentioned "curse" when the rest of us got becalmed on *Varua* on our return. We felt lucky and relieved to motor into the Ala Wai Yacht Harbor after 10 days, nearly out of fuel, food and water.

Today, Palmyra is deserted again. The copra venture did not work out, and the development of Palmyra came to an abrupt halt because of litigation. Federal Judge Martin Pence issued an order in 1980 that no one be allowed on Palmyra without meeting a number of criteria, but that hasn't stopped yachters and speculators from going there without our permission. Often we hear that strangers have claimed to represent the family in developing Palmyra, and sometimes we hear that other people say they own it. Hopeful visionaries still call us with ideas. We've been approached about using Palmyra as a base for mining sea nodules, making it a retreat for writers and artists, and using it as a site for shooting off satellite-launching rockets.

Always there is talk of big money, but the big money is always in the future and usually rests on the condition that we give someone the right to do whatever he wants at little or no cost to him. The only big money we've seen is what has vanished from our own pockets.

If money and greed are at the root of the "Palmyra curse," then disillusionment is the sadder result. When the phone rings today with yet another inquiry about Palmyra, my first impulse is to hang up. Ainsley has become so careful of what he says when asked about the islands that he jokingly responds, "Palmyra? Well, it may be an atoll that possibly is located slightly north of the equator, but don't quote me on that."

Leslie doesn't even like to talk about the island. "I'm leaving it in the hands of my brothers," he says. "I've spent 61 years worrying about that place."